WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1.   A system providing guided buying decision support within an electronic marketplace environment, comprising:

a server operable to interact with buyers to receive procurement parameters for items;

an option generator operable to receive procurement parameters for a particular item needed by a particular buyer, determine one or more acceptable item-supplier combinations consistent with the procurement parameters for the item, and generate one or more recommended options for communication to the buyer, each recommended option specifying a service through which it is possible to procure the item consistent with the procurement parameters, the server further operable to interact with the buyer to receive a selection of a particular recommended option; and

a manager application operable to automatically initiate the service specified in the selected recommended option in an attempt to procure the item consistent with the procurement parameters.

2.   The system of Claim 1, wherein the procurement parameters comprise:

one or more parameters each specifying a characteristic of the item;

one or more parameters each specifying a date by which the item must be procured; and

one or more parameters each specifying a characteristic of an acceptable supplier of the item.

3.   The system of Claim 1, wherein the server is operable to communicate to the buyer a first display through which the buyer may input the procurements parameters and a second display through which the buyer may select a recommended option.

4.   The system of Claim 1, wherein the server is operable to communicate to the buyer a single display through which the buyer may select a recommended option or input one or more alternative procurement parameters, the display allowing the buyer to see in substantially real time the impact of the alternative procurement parameters on the recommended options.

5.   The system of Claim 1, wherein each recommended option is selected from the group consisting of:

        a recommended purchase from the supplier currently offering the item at the lowest price consistent with the procurement parameters;

5   a recommended auction in which the item is currently being auctioned under circumstances consistent with the procurement parameters; and

        a recommended reverse auction that may be initiated with respect to the item under circumstances consistent with the procurement parameters.

10   6.   The system of Claim 5, wherein the recommended purchase is based on data obtained from a catalog, an inventory listing, or a bid/ask exchange through which the supplier is offering the item.

        7.   The system of Claim 5, wherein the circumstances of the recommended
15   auction are selected from the group consisting of:

        the date the auction is scheduled to complete is consistent with a delivery date procurement parameter and the last bid is below the lowest price quoted against an acceptable item-supplier combination;

        the auction is the currently running auction expected to close at the lowest
20   price; and

        the auction is the currently running auction with the highest probability that the buyer will win the auction with a bid below the lowest price quoted against an acceptable item-supplier combination.

25   8.   The system of Claim 7, wherein the probability of winning an auction is determined according to the length of time the auction has already been running, the length of time the auction will continue running, and the percentage of buyers that could participate in the auction but have not yet placed bids.

30   9.   The system of Claim 5, wherein the probability of the buyer winning the recommended auction is provided to the buyer to allow the buyer to decide whether to select the recommended auction instead of the recommended purchase.

10.   The system of Claim 5, wherein the manager is operable to recommend a bid for placement in the recommended auction.

11.   The system of Claim 10, wherein the recommended bid is a proxy bid with specified increments and a ceiling equal to the lowest price quoted against an acceptable item-supplier combination.

12.   The system of Claim 5, wherein the circumstances of the recommended reverse auction are selected from the group consisting of:

there are at least a specified number of suppliers that could satisfy a delivery date procurement parameter if the reverse auction lasted for a specified length of time; and

the reverse auction has the highest probability of all evaluated reverse auctions that the buyer will procure the item below the lowest price quoted against an acceptable item-supplier combination.

13.   The system of Claim 12, wherein the probability the buyer will procure the item below the lowest price quoted against an acceptable item-supplier combination is determined according to:

the length of time the reverse auction can be allowed to run consistent with a delivery date procurement parameter; and

the number of suppliers that could satisfy the delivery date procurement parameter if the reverse auction was allowed to run for that length of time.

14.   The system of Claim 12, wherein the probability the buyer will procure the item below the lowest price quoted against an acceptable item-supplier combination is provided to the buyer to allow the buyer to decide whether to select the recommended reverse auction instead of the recommended purchase or the recommended auction.

15.   The system of Claim 1, further comprising a planning engine operable to receive status data for the buyer from one or more associated enterprise systems, the status data specifying one or more of the procurement parameters.

16.   The system of Claim 1, wherein the server is further operable to communicate to the buyer a recommended course of action specifying the recommended option that should be selected to give the buyer the best opportunity to procure the item consistent with the procurement parameters and at the lowest price.

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17.   The system of Claim 1, further comprising an electronic marketplace that supports the server, the option generator, and the manager application.

18.   A method of providing guided buying decision support within an electronic marketplace environment, comprising:

receiving procurement parameters for a particular item needed by a particular buyer;

5   determining one or more acceptable item-supplier combinations consistent with the procurement parameters for the item;

generating one or more recommended options for communication to the buyer, each recommended option specifying a service through which it is possible to procure the item consistent with the procurement parameters;

10   receiving a selection of a particular recommended option; and

automatically initiating the service specified in the selected recommended option in an attempt to procure the needed item consistent with the procurement parameters.

19.   The method of Claim 18, wherein the procurement parameters comprise:

15   one or more parameters each specifying a characteristic of the item;

one or more parameters each specifying a date by which the item must be procured; and

one or more parameters each specifying a characteristic of an acceptable supplier of the item.

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20.   The method of Claim 18, further comprising communicating to the buyer a first display through which the buyer may input the procurements parameters and a second display through which the buyer may select a recommended option.

25   21.   The method of Claim 18, further comprising communicating to the buyer a single display through which the buyer may select a recommended option or input one or more alternative procurement parameters, the display allowing the buyer to see in substantially real time the impact of the alternative procurement parameters on the recommended options.   ◦

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22. The method of Claim 18, wherein each recommended option is selected from the group consisting of:

a recommended purchase from the supplier currently offering the item at the lowest price consistent with the procurement parameters;

a recommended auction in which the item is currently being auctioned under circumstances consistent with the procurement parameters; and

a recommended reverse auction that may be initiated with respect to the item under circumstances consistent with the procurement parameters.

23. The method of Claim 22, wherein the recommended purchase is based on data obtained from a catalog, an inventory listing, or a bid/ask exchange through which the supplier is offering the item.

24. The method of Claim 22, wherein the circumstances of the recommended auction are selected from the group consisting of:

the date the auction is scheduled to complete is consistent with a delivery date procurement parameter and the last bid is below the lowest price quoted against an acceptable item-supplier combination;

the auction is the currently running auction expected to close at the lowest price; and

the auction is the currently running auction with the highest probability that the buyer will win the auction with a bid below the lowest price quoted against an acceptable item-supplier combination.

25. The method of Claim 24, wherein the probability of winning an auction is determined according to the length of time the auction has already been running, the length of time the auction will continue running, and the percentage of buyers that could participate in the auction but have not yet placed bids.

26. The method of Claim 22, further comprising providing to the buyer the probability of the buyer winning the recommended auction to allow the buyer to decide whether to select the recommended auction instead of the recommended purchase.

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27. The method of Claim 22, further comprising recommending a bid for placement in the recommended auction.

28. The method of Claim 27, wherein the recommended bid is a proxy bid with specified increments and a ceiling equal to the lowest price quoted against an acceptable item-supplier combination.

29. The method of Claim 22, wherein the circumstances of the recommended reverse auction are selected from the group consisting of:

that there are at least a specified number of suppliers that could satisfy a delivery date procurement parameter if the reverse auction lasted for a specified length of time; and

the reverse auction has the highest probability of all evaluated reverse auctions that the buyer will procure the item below the lowest price quoted against an acceptable item-supplier combination.

30. The method of Claim 29, wherein the probability the buyer will procure the item below the lowest price quoted against an acceptable item-supplier combination is determined according to:

the length of time the reverse auction can be allowed to run consistent with a delivery date procurement parameter; and

the number of suppliers that could satisfy the delivery date procurement parameter if the reverse auction was allowed to run for that length of time.

31. The method of Claim 29, further comprising providing to the buyer the probability the buyer will procure the item below the lowest price quoted against an acceptable item-supplier combination to allow the buyer to decide whether to select the recommended reverse auction instead of the recommended purchase or the recommended auction.

32. The method of Claim 18, further comprising receiving status data for the buyer from one or more associated enterprise systems, the status data specifying one or more of the procurement parameters.

33.   The method of Claim 18, further comprising communicating to the buyer a recommended course of action specifying the recommended option that should be selected to give the buyer the best opportunity to procure the item consistent with the procurement parameters and at the lowest price.

34.   The method of Claim 18, wherein the method is performed using components of an electronic marketplace.

35.   Software for providing guided buying decision support within an electronic marketplace environment, the software embodied in a computer-readable medium and when executed operable to:

receive procurement parameters for a particular item needed by a particular buyer;

5   determine one or more acceptable item-supplier combinations consistent with the procurement parameters for the item;

generate one or more recommended options for communication to the buyer, each recommended option specifying a service through which it is possible to procure the item consistent with the procurement parameters;

10   receive a selection of a particular recommended option; and

automatically initiate the service specified in the selected recommended option in an attempt to procure the item consistent with the procurement parameters.

36.   The software of Claim 35, wherein the procurement parameters comprise:

15   one or more parameters each specifying a characteristic of the item;

one or more parameters each specifying a date by which the item must be procured; and

one or more parameters each specifying a characteristic of an acceptable supplier of the item.

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37.   The software of Claim 35, further operable to communicate to the buyer a first display through which the buyer may input the procurements parameters and a second display through which the buyer may select a recommended option.

25   38.   The software of Claim 35, further operable to communicate to the buyer a single display through which the buyer may select a recommended option or input one or more alternative procurement parameters, the display allowing the buyer to see in substantially real time the impact of the alternative procurement parameters on the recommended options.

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39. The software of Claim 35, wherein each recommended option is selected from the group consisting of:

a recommended purchase from the supplier currently offering the item at the lowest price consistent with the procurement parameters;

a recommended auction in which the item is currently being auctioned under circumstances consistent with the procurement parameters; and

a recommended reverse auction that may be initiated with respect to the item under circumstances consistent with the procurement parameters.

40. The software of Claim 39, wherein the recommended purchase is based on data obtained from a catalog, an inventory listing, or a bid/ask exchange through which the supplier is offering the item.

41. The software of Claim 39, wherein the circumstances of the recommended auction are selected from the group consisting of:

the date the auction is scheduled to complete is consistent with a delivery date procurement parameter and the last bid is below the lowest price quoted against an acceptable item-supplier combination;

the auction is the currently running auction expected to close at the lowest price; and

the auction is the currently running auction with the highest probability that the buyer will win the auction with a bid below the lowest price quoted against an acceptable item-supplier combination.

42. The software of Claim 41, wherein the probability of winning an auction is determined according to the length of time the auction has already been running, the length of time the auction will continue running, and the percentage of buyers that could participate in the auction but have not yet placed bids.

43. The software of Claim 39, further operable to provide to the buyer the probability of the buyer winning the recommended auction to allow the buyer to decide whether to select the recommended auction instead of the recommended purchase.

44.   The software of Claim 39, further operable to recommend a bid for placement in the recommended auction.

45.   The software of Claim 44, wherein the recommended bid is a proxy bid with specified increments and a ceiling equal to the lowest price quoted against an acceptable item-supplier combination.

46.   The software of Claim 39, wherein the circumstances of the recommended reverse auction are selected from the group consisting of:

that there are at least a specified number of suppliers that could satisfy a delivery date procurement parameter if the reverse auction lasted for a specified length of time; and

the reverse auction has the highest probability of all evaluated reverse auctions that the buyer will procure the item below the lowest price quoted against an acceptable item-supplier combination.

47.   The software of Claim 46, wherein the probability the buyer will procure the item below the lowest price quoted against an acceptable item-supplier combination is determined according to:

the length of time the reverse auction can be allowed to run consistent with a delivery date procurement parameter; and

the number of suppliers that could satisfy the delivery date procurement parameter if the reverse auction was allowed to run for that length of time.

48.   The software of Claim 46, further operable to provide to the buyer the probability the buyer will procure the item below the lowest price quoted against an acceptable item-supplier combination to allow the buyer to decide whether to select the recommended reverse auction instead of the recommended purchase or the recommended auction.

49.   The software of Claim 35, further operable to receive status data for the buyer from one or more associated enterprise systems, the status data specifying one or more of the procurement parameters.

50.   The software of Claim 35, further operable to communicate to the buyer a recommended course of action specifying the recommended option that should be selected to give the buyer the best opportunity to procure the item consistent with the procurement parameters and at the lowest price.

51.   The software of Claim 35, wherein the software is executed using components of an electronic marketplace.

52.   A system providing guided buying decision support within an electronic marketplace environment, comprising:

means for receiving procurement parameters for a particular item needed by a particular buyer, determining one or more acceptable item-supplier combinations consistent with the procurement parameters for the item, and generating one or more recommended options for communication to the buyer, each recommended option specifying a service through which it is possible to procure the item consistent with the procurement parameters;

means for interacting with the buyer to receive a selection of a particular recommended option; and

means for automatically initiating the service specified in the selected recommended option in an attempt to procure the item consistent with the procurement parameters.

53.   A system providing guided buying decision support within an electronic marketplace environment, comprising:

a server operable to interact with buyers to receive procurement parameters for items;

an option generator operable to:

receive procurement parameters for a particular item needed by a particular buyer;

determine one or more acceptable item-supplier combinations consistent with the procurement parameters for the item; and

generate one or more recommended options for communication to the buyer, each recommended option specifying a service through which it is possible to procure the item consistent with the procurement parameters, each recommended option being selected from the group consisting of a recommended purchase from the supplier offering the item at the lowest price consistent with the procurement parameters, a recommended auction in which the item is being auctioned under circumstances consistent with the procurement parameters, and a recommended reverse auction that may be initiated with respect to the item under circumstances consistent with the procurement parameters;

the server further operable to provide to the buyer the probabilities the buyer will procure the item in the recommended auction and in the recommended reverse auction below the lowest price quoted against an acceptable item-supplier combination to allow the buyer to decide whether to select the recommended auction or recommended reverse auction, respectively, instead of the recommended purchase, the server further operable to interact with the buyer to receive a selection of a particular recommended option; and

a manager application operable to automatically initiate the service specified in the selected recommended option in an attempt to procure the item consistent with the procurement parameters.

54.   A method of providing guided buying decision support within an electronic marketplace environment, comprising:

receiving procurement parameters for a particular item needed by a particular buyer;

determining one or more acceptable item-supplier combinations consistent with the procurement parameters for the item;

generating one or more recommended options for communication to the buyer, each recommended option specifying a service through which it is possible to procure the item consistent with the procurement parameters, each recommended option being selected from the group consisting of a recommended purchase from the supplier offering the item at the lowest price consistent with the procurement parameters, a recommended auction in which the item is being auctioned under circumstances consistent with the procurement parameters, and a recommended reverse auction that may be initiated with respect to the item under circumstances consistent with the procurement parameters;

providing to the buyer the probabilities the buyer will procure the item in the recommended auction and in the recommended reverse auction below the lowest price quoted against an acceptable item-supplier combination to allow the buyer to decide whether to select the recommended auction or recommended reverse auction, respectively, instead of the recommended purchase;

receiving a selection of a particular recommended option; and

automatically initiating the service specified in the selected recommended option in an attempt to procure the item consistent with the procurement parameters.

55.   Software for providing guided buying decision support within an electronic marketplace environment, the software being embodied in a computer-readable medium and when executed operable to:

receive procurement parameters for a particular item needed by a particular buyer;

5   determine one or more acceptable item-supplier combinations consistent with the procurement parameters for the item;

generate one or more recommended options for communication to the buyer, each recommended option specifying a service through which it is possible to procure the item consistent with the procurement parameters, each recommended option being selected

10   from the group consisting of a recommended purchase from the supplier offering the item at the lowest price consistent with the procurement parameters, a recommended auction in which the item is being auctioned under circumstances consistent with the procurement parameters, and a recommended reverse auction that may be initiated with respect to the item under circumstances consistent with the procurement parameters;

15   provide to the buyer the probabilities the buyer will procure the item in the recommended auction and in the recommended reverse auction below the lowest price quoted against an acceptable item-supplier combination to allow the buyer to decide whether to select the recommended auction or recommended reverse auction, respectively, instead of the recommended purchase;

20   receive a selection of a particular recommended option; and

automatically initiate the service specified in the selected recommended option in an attempt to procure the item consistent with the procurement parameters.